

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Don't Send In the Clones

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For a time in college, I shared a dorm suite with three other girls.

We food shopped and ate dinner together but always squabbled over what groceries to buy. It got to the point where the only food we could agree on was corn, so that was what we got.

This upset my mother, who used to call me regularly to ominously demand: “Do you know why the Incas are extinct?”

This was B.G. (Before Google.) So I simply assumed that it either had to do with too much maize in the Inca diet or that Mom was just trying to scare me into healthier behavior — as when she attempted to ward off any tequila-tipping by calling to ask portentously: Do you know why so many tequila drinkers have nervous breakdowns?

Anyway, on one shopping expedition, I had a big fight with a roommate, no doubt over whether to get canned or frozen corn, creamed or whole kernel.

We were at a supermarket in a blighted part of D.C. My roommate got furious, stormed off in her car and left me stranded. I called my brother Kevin to come get me. On the way back to school, he offered this advice: “Never pick a fight with the guy who’s driving.”

I took that to heart, literally and metaphorically. It has spared me plenty of problems since.

The serendipity of ending up with roommates that you like, despite your differences, or can't stand, despite your similarities, or grow to like, despite your reservations, is an experience that toughens you up and broadens you out for the rest of life.

So I was dubious when I read in The Wall Street Journal last week that students are relying more on online roommate matching services to avoid getting paired with strangers or peers with different political views, study habits and messiness quotients.

A University of Florida official told The Journal that a quarter of incoming freshmen signed up to a Facebook application called RoomBug to seek out a roommate they thought would be more compatible than a random selection.

Other students are using URoomSurf. It makes matches with questions like these: How often do you shower? How neat are you? How outgoing are you? What's your study/party balance? Is it O.K. for your roommate to use your belongings?

I guess if I had used URoomSurf, I might have avoided those donnybrooks with one pill of a roommate, who yelled at me for such infractions as allegedly stretching out her sweater and eating a whole can of Campbell's Chunky Soup when I could have made do with half.

But co-habiting with snarly and moody roomies prepared me for the working world, where people can be outlandishly cantankerous over small stuff.

Just as rooming with Donna taught me humility. She was the sexiest girl on campus, an actress who would later brush off John Travolta in the Bee Gees-scored opening credits of "Saturday Night Fever." And Susan, who wouldn't leave the room when it rained and who lost 20 pounds on an all-brownies diet, taught me to tolerate quirks.

I knew the lovely Susan would be my friend for life when I arrived in our freshman-year room shadowed by my mom, who was carrying a butcher knife, a can of Mace and a letter opener.

Mom wanted us to be well armed against rapists — she wrote down instructions about how to insert the letter opener into an attacker's jugular — and Susan appreciated the gesture.

As in Darwinian evolution, cross-pollination with diverse strains promotes species development.

One young woman I know was appalled at first that the giggly cheerleader and former prom queen sharing her freshman room at the University of Pennsylvania put up 'N Sync posters “unironically.” But in the end, she realized that just because her roommate loved 'N Sync and wore cute outfits did not necessary mean she was shallow. And the prom queen realized that just because you hum when you write papers doesn't mean you're mentally ill. The prom queen lightened up the brooding, cynical, emo chick, and even got her to an 'N Sync concert — unironically.

Choosing roommates who are mirror images may fit with our narcissistic and microtargeted society, but it retards creativity and social growth. This reluctance to mix it up also has been reflected in the lack of full-throated political and cultural debates on campuses (as opposed to ersatz debates on cable TV), replaced by a quiet P.C. acceptance of differing views or an obnoxious stereotyping of anyone different.

As The Times's Michiko Kakutani noted, the diminished debate syndrome at schools “suggests a closing off of the possibilities of growth and transformation.”

Besides intensifying partisanship and conspiracy theories — think the birthers — the Internet divides the world more firmly into niches, birds of a feather avidly flocking together.

As you leave behind high school to redefine and even reinvent yourself as adult, you need exposure to an array of different ideas, backgrounds and perspectives — not a cordon of clones.

College is not only where you hit the books. It also should be where you learn not to judge a book by its cover.